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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a pilot study that emerged from two separate doctoral studies on teacher curriculum decision making and school-based management. The pilot study investigated the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership, noting conceptual and contextual links between the thinking and practice of teacher curriculum decision making and school-based management in Hong Kong. The first phase of the study, which occurred in an elementary school, examined curriculum leadership from the viewpoint of teachers, students, and parents. The second phase of the study will focus on a primary school with an Asian student population in Brisbane, Australia. Using narratives and conversations, the study analyzed and interpreted the ideas and efforts of teachers, students, and parents related to curriculum leadership. Results indicated that much work needs to be done to engage parents in active partnerships with the school. Parents felt that curriculum leadership was related to the issue of power and authority at a personal and school level. Teachers called for a whole-school approach to initiating innovative curriculum practices and invited active, authentic parent participation. Students were enthusiastic about engaging in a conversation about volunteer work and authentic contribution to the school. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

Theorising curriculum leadership:

A shared agenda in the context of school-based management

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**Theorising curriculum leadership:
A shared agenda in the context of school-based management**

Marianne Koo

Abstract

The paper reports on a pilot study emerging from the research results of two separate doctoral studies in teacher curriculum decision-making and school-based management. The pilot work investigates the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership; and, aims to bring the research outcomes of these two doctoral studies to a new platform upon which the sustaining and generative research efforts focus on theorising curriculum leadership for change and transformation at the time of curriculum reforms. The pilot work is conceptualised and contextualised by making conceptual links and contextual relations between the thinking and practice of teacher curriculum decision-making and school-based management in Hong Kong. In the first phase, the investigation was undertaken in a primary school in Hong Kong and to be reported in AERA. In this light, the purpose of my paper is to theorise curriculum leadership from the wider input and participation of teachers, students and parents in which the lifeworld perspectives of these significant stakeholders are analysed and interpreted as emerging issues within the context of school-based management. In the second phase, the pilot work will be extended to one primary school taking Asian students in Brisbane. Given the richness and complexity of cultural contexts in both Hong Kong and Brisbane, this sort of investigation is conducted within a methodological framework using an Action Research approach as iterative, collaborative, critical and reconstructive. The inclusion of Critical Friends (see Chapman, 1996; Macpherson, Brooker & Aspland, 2000; Koo, 2002b) is based on the nature of cross-cultural investigations in this pilot work.

Curriculum leadership, in this paper, is informed mainly by a set of literature which illuminates transformative and reconstructive perspectives for celebrating teachers in curriculum making, for example Macpherson (2000), Macpherson, Brooker and Aspland (2000), Macpherson, Aspland, Brooker and Elliott (1999); Macpherson, Aspland, Elliott and Brooker (2002); and envisions and enacts curriculum work as a democratic calling for curriculum wisdom challenge (see Henderson, 1999, 2001). On the other hand, Koo (2002a) states that it is both the central role and the self-identity of professional teachers that teacher curriculum decision-making be legitimate, developing a sense of empowerment from an inside-out perspective. Koo (2002a) presents four approaches to theorising teacher curriculum decision-making within a

context of curriculum change. On the other hand, Chan and Koo (1998) contends that generally little has changed 'before and after' school-based management was introduced in Hong Kong primary schools. Chan (2000) further compares and contrasts leadership beliefs in schools where shared decision-making was successful with those less successful ones; and concludes that leadership plays an important role in facilitating cultural change in an organisation. This paper takes the view of theorising curriculum leadership as an emerging need for both deepening curriculum work and widening the scope of school participation in terms of curriculum decision-making that will generate a shared agenda in the public interest.

Using narratives and conversations, the discrete ideas and unconnected efforts of teachers, students and parents about the notion of curriculum leadership are analysed and interpreted. The outcomes of this reconnaissance in the school sites of two cities will form the basis for beginning understandings about how teachers, students and parents find their place in curriculum making within a context of school-based management, their readiness to engage in curriculum change initiatives and their potential to be included more in leadership/partnership action. These beginning understandings will lead to a larger and more sustained research investigation at a later date.

1. Curriculum leadership and school-based management

The main thrust of this pilot work is set on the emerging ideas of shared decision-making which capture the thinking and practice of curriculum leadership (see Koo, 2002a) and school-based management (see Chan, 1999, 2000) at the 21st Century in Hong Kong. Since the mid of 90's, many of the significant social, economic and political changes have prompted a move from meeting quantitative targets to striving for qualitative improvement (Education Commission, 1997, p.i). However, this intention is much to be seen as policy rhetoric rather than what has been realizing in teachers' lives and work for over a decade. Much attention is given to restructuring schools as a way of education reform as far as school-based management is concerned. Local governance empowers the stakeholders themselves to work effectively for the educational welfare of the students under their care (School-Based Management Consultative Committee, 2000, p.i). On the one hand, the Hong Kong SAR government has prepared an Education (Amendment) Bill 2002, which was gazetted on 22 November 2002. The HKSAR government said, "the provisions of the Bill allow schools greater flexibility and autonomy and at the same

time, enhance schools' transparency and accountability¹. On the other hand, teachers have given much of their time and effort to administrative and management decisions while curriculum decision-making appears to be marginalized in the agenda of school reforms (for example Koo, 1999c, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a). Leithwood and Menzies (1998) report that restructuring schools by allocating to them more decision-making authority is a widespread reform initiative; and, identify obstacles which are relevant to teachers, principals, parents and the wider community, site councils, schools as a whole, and district administrators. While school-based management has been promoted by its advocates as a strategy for increasing the effectiveness of schools, the quality of school education is more often to be interpreted as innovative and committed teaching, creative and active learning, parent participation and teacher professional learning within the ethos of life-long and life-wide learning.

This paper takes the stance that a holistic view of tri-partite relations among students, parents and teachers on reculturing schools should reflect the nature of educational partnership. These major stakeholders share the responsibility of leading the schools change in the way which puts curriculum and pedagogy issues and problems upfront. All this sets the impetus on investigating the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership in the pilot study which, it is hoped, generates future directions on both methodological issues and conceptual and contextual frameworks of the research problem at local and international sites.

Therefore, the pilot work is encapsulated on the premise that it still looks mysterious how the decentralization of decision-making has been impinging on teachers', students' and parents' lives and work. The research question includes what curriculum leadership actually means to teachers, parents and students within a context of school-based management; how curriculum leadership can be realised in sites practising school-based management; and, what might be some possible implications to envisioning and enacting productive partnerships within some emerging ideas of curriculum leadership.

II. Whose interests and whose future

I conducted a qualitative study about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong (see Koo, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000a,

¹ Brief Notes on School-Based Management downloaded from the website of Education and Manpower Branch, HKSAR, http://www.cmb.gov.hk/EDNEWHP/school/sbm/main/english/SBM_Intro_e.pdf at 10.30am on 26 March 2003., page 4.

2000b, 2000c, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b). Underpinning by a conceptual framework of curriculum making and school-based management, my former doctoral studies are related to this small-scale pilot study in four parts: the challenge *to* the curriculum traditions of “old wine, new bottle”; the challenge *to* the reform temptations of being “unauthentic, huge and vague”; the challenge *of* curriculum making; and, the challenge *for* democratic curriculum leadership. Envisioning and enacting all these challenges may encompass a holistic view of creating spaces and places for major stakeholders in research partnership in action about curriculum making.

The research outcomes of my doctoral studies pointed out that firstly, inclusion of major stakeholders other than teachers and principals in theorising curriculum needed further systematic investigation. Collaboration of teachers, university researchers and system personnel to enhance the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers through an Action Research approach appeared to be necessary. This signifies a challenge to the curriculum traditions of “old wine, new bottle” – we see the changes “outside” but things “inside” are the same. It is the inside-out perspective that we envision this challenge calling for curriculum wisdom. Secondly, taking reconstructions of teacher curriculum decision-making into action required creating communicative spaces (Kemmis, 2000) for educational researchers and other major stakeholders in order to engage in academic and professional discourse across cultural contexts. All this requires wisdom, benevolence and courage to resist the temptations from being “unauthentic, huge and vague” in education reforms. We need real change in the bloodstream of the education systems – school culture that matters! It is important for (re)locating the practitioners’ and stakeholders’ attention and efforts to the lifeblood of education reforms – teachers’ curriculum work for uplifting the quality of learning and teaching. Thirdly, the challenge of curriculum making related to whoever strives to develop a sense of empowerment and to reconstruct teacher curriculum decision-making as both the means and the end, leading to new conceptions and practices of curriculum leadership. Fourthly, taking a democratic stance, curriculum making might be perceived as envisioning and enacting new identities for “curriculum” and “research” in education in the 21st Century in Hong Kong, along with the rest of the world. The challenge for democratic curriculum leadership gives hope to which theorising curriculum leadership as an emerging need for both deepening curriculum work and widening the scope of school participation in terms of curriculum decision-making will generate a shared agenda in the context of school-based management. Moreover, the four approaches to theorising teacher curriculum decision-making (Koo, 2002a) which included a traditional approach, a

humanistic approach, a democratic approach and a neo-democratic approach provided me a theoretical framework of informing this pilot study.

All these four challenges in the pilot study which are conceptually framed within curriculum leadership and contextually framed within school-based management are proactive to the calling for educational partnership advocated in both local and global arenas. Chan (1999) raises the central issue of improving education in the self-managing school movement is whether people can create critical changes in the way they make decisions. In self-managing schools, leaders are those who themselves are convinced by the "ologies" of shared decision-making and are committed to the "goals and ideals" they believe in (Chan, 1999, p.273). The characteristics of shared decision-making thus include total involvement, having a sense of power and the influence on situations, requiring decisions about principles, and a change of mindset of the principals and teachers in response to power and authority. In this sense, people engaged in leadership within a context of school-based management are alert to their position consciousness which empowers themselves to work *with* other people as partners. On the contrary, those who do not believe and practise in shared decision-making usually work *on* other people as followers or implementors. This absence of changing the mindset in regard to power and authority confronts the good practice of shared decision-making in self-managing schools. In this light, the reform effort may be shifted from the human relationship of *I-Thou* toward *I-It* (Buber, 1958) in educational settings. To those principals who are commonly treated as "leaders" in schools, it seems that the planning and implementation of school-based management have not much to do with the issues and problems of teachers' curriculum work because "management" and "curriculum" are more often regarded as two separate entities in school reform.

O'Donoghue and Dimmock (1998) study the teachers' dilemmas in relation to their curriculum work when education restructuring concerns a deregulated, decentralised system replacing central planning, control, and supervision as represented by the movement of school-based management. One outcome perceived by the teachers is that no fundamental changes take place: "they described the decisions that have been made as ones concerned with such 'trivial issues as what kind of flowers to have around the school, where they are to go, how the grounds should be laid out, and what kind of choir uniforms we should have'" (O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1998, p.101). In this regard, the notions of *leadership* and *partnership* as two sets of separate beliefs and practice in reform initiatives shed new light in exploring the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership. It is at this point that this pilot work

is significant for generating more insightful ideas of investigating curriculum leadership in terms of shared decision-making in self-managing schools in the 21st century.

Moreover, a critical link to the needs of changing teachers, transforming curriculum and restructuring schools is the basic question of what kind of schools we actually need. Eisner (2002) puts this nicely because what seldom gets addressed in our efforts to reform schools is the vision of education that serves as the ideal for both the practice of schooling and its outcomes.

"The kind of schools we need would encourage deep conversation in classrooms...Of course, all of us need to learn to engage in deep conversation. In many ways, we need to model what we expect our students to learn. But I am convinced that conversation about ideas that matter to students and teachers and that occupy a central place in our curriculum can be a powerful means of converting the academic institutions we call schools into intellectual institutions. Such a transformation would represent a paradigm shift in the culture of schooling" (Eisner, 2002, p.582).

Accordingly, the focus of this pilot work is to engage some teachers, parents and students of a primary school in deep conversation (see Applebee, 1996) about curriculum leadership within a context of school-based management. In the first phase of the pilot study, the four group interviews provided rich data for setting a shared agenda when curriculum actions would be considered. In fact, the conversation facilitated the participants (teachers, parents and students) to reflect and to share their vision of education as well as the kind of curriculum practice that will move the school in the direction they value when shared decision-making is celebrated throughout the processes of change and transformation in the school.

In regard to the methodological framework, it is noteworthy to consider that the main purpose of this pilot study echoes Denzin and Lincoln's (2002) statement that "in the seventh moment, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is a pressing demand to show how the practices of critical, interpretive qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. It is necessary to examine new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to the workings of a free democratic society" (p.xii). The use of an Action Research approach as iterative, collaborative, critical and reconstructive in this pilot study acknowledges my intention (as the researcher) to not only explore the world of phenomenon but also change it to a better world. Within the methodological framework, using narratives and

conversations encompass the methods of engaging individual minds and collective efforts in data collection processes; and, generating directions and ways of ongoing study.

III. Creating the communicative space: A conversational approach

In the Phase I of this pilot study, I worked with six teachers, six students and six parents (ranging from Primary 4 to Primary 6) in a primary school of Hong Kong. The school site will not be identified by its real name. But for communication, I call it the Start and Smart Primary School. This school has developed the working relationship with me (as a researcher) during my doctoral study between late 1998 and mid 2000. The school has recently had several intakes of new migrant children from mainland China. Some of them are over the average age which is twelve in Primary Six. Before the group interviews, the principal distributed the research files to each participant. The content of the research file included the researcher's letter to the participants, a few questions which the participants might have, a sheet of writing individual story, three interview questions, a 13-page paper and a form of research acceptance. One day before the interviews, the Parents and Teachers Association conducted a meeting and over twenty parents attended.

After the first three interviews, a summary of each group conversation was then developed and shared with the other small groups at the school in the last interview. The data collection processes were completed by a meeting involving the three groups together. With reference to the three parts of the research question, the interpretation and analysis of data in the first three interviews are reported in the following.

The Start and Smart Primary School

	Teachers	Students	Parents
What did/does curriculum	<u>Past</u> 1. enthusiastic teachers 2. simple structure of school management 3. one-off and individual-based change 4. a lack of systematic	<u>Past</u> 1. a lack of equal participation in some students between interest-based activities and elite training 2. struggling to make free choice of some physical	<u>Past</u> 1. parents' past experiences in primary education 2. children's educational achievement based on school examination results

leadership mean to me? ● In the past ● At present	planning and evaluation on innovation 5. a lack of parental support 6. often talk but no action in curriculum change <u>Present</u> 1. working with parents 2. allocating more resources for teachers' curriculum work, e.g. community resources 3. complicated school structure 4. unclear channels of communication within the school 5. accountability to students rather than the top 6. shared responsibility of initiating changes 7. pledge for transparency in school policy 8. being proactive in problematising teachers' curriculum work 9. a biased direction of developing home-school relations	education and performing arts activities offered in the school programs 3. moving away from interest-based learning toward striving for school reputation and awards <u>Present</u> 1. student volunteer work after school 2. peer tutoring and group support for remedial learning after school 3. activity-based learning in classrooms 4. enjoyable in non-textbook learning 5. various forms of assignment which require students longer time and different approaches of completion	3. improper balance of student learning between academic studies and cultural subjects (ie. physical education, art and craft, music) 4. positive teacher-student relationships 5. negativism on home-school relations <u>Present</u> 1. intimate relationships between parents and children 2. emphasis on joy of learning 3. reducing the pressure on parents by moving away from examination-oriented education 4. reducing the pressure on teachers 5. developing children a sense of satisfaction in school 6. parents offering volunteer work after school (e.g. community youth group, story-telling by parents, young-tutor program) 7. parents volunteer work as school resource 8. academically weak students having unequal participation in school programs, for example interest groups
How can curriculum leadership be realised in sites practising school-based management?	1. strategic and long-term planning on initiating changes of school programs 2. calling for team work, committed teachers and principal leadership 3. regarding home-school relations as partnership 4. leadership does not rely on a single person alone 5. empowering teachers 6. teachers repositioning themselves as active,	1. self contribution from students to school, for example using own laptop computers for IT in education 2. shared responsibility in upgrading the computer facilities of the school, for example taking up a portion of the required money which the school and the government are not able to afford 3. ongoing discussions among students on issues and problems of school change or reform	1. committed teachers to teach students 2. education with love 3. whole-hearted change 4. passion of teaching 5. reflection on the instrumental aspects of PTA: parents participation due to deriving own benefits 6. seeking a win-win situation between PTA

	authentic and determined professionals of curriculum making	4. actively express opinions, especially innovative ideas to teachers	and the school itself
7.	communication channels clearly defined	5. exploring the possibility of fund-raising activities	7. witness on self-growth of participation in PTA
8.	rights and responsibilities of functional posts clearly defined	6. enthusiastic students to offer volunteer work in young-tutor programs after school	8. a lack of independency in school management because of bi-sessional schooling
9.	the school adopting open-door policy	7. calling for student cooperation in organizing a weekly or monthly school bulletin given the purpose of sharing the joy of learning and teaching	9. more equal power of decision-making, for example finding more fiscal resources for the school

Based on the collected data, the first group of teachers acknowledged the change of teachers' curriculum work in terms of personal decision-making and collective decision-making. When more community resources were allocated for innovative curriculum practices, teachers did not find it easier to work with parents. One teacher expressed that it was necessary to review the current direction of developing home-school relations in school. There was a major concern on open, fair and transparent participation for more teachers and parents to navigate the collaborative journey of curriculum change. The second group of students was seeking a balance between academic learning and leisure and recreational activities in school. Some wished to gain more freedom to choose those activities which were more appealing to students themselves rather than selected participation merely for school reputation and rewards. Most of them were in favor of volunteer work and authentic contribution to school in the aspects they were good at. This group of research participants was even more willing to discuss and share educational issues and school news with other students in order to stimulate some innovative ideas. The third group of parents raised similar points as those in the principles of education reform in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 2000) – student-focused, no-loser, life-wide learning and society-wide mobilization. These parents admitted that there was much to do as engaging in active partnership with the school. According to some parents, curriculum leadership was related to the issue of power and authority at a personal level and a school level. The decentralization of decision-making could be realised by the degree of freedom which the school principal enabled to work with other people to promote self-initiated changes. In this respect, it was evident that more could be done to explore the inclusion of parents in creating spaces and places for themselves in curriculum leadership.

IV. Whose responsibility and whose agenda

In the fourth interview, the teachers called for a whole-school approach of initiating innovative curriculum practices and invited active and authentic participation from parents to work together. Several times in the meeting, the parents were encouraged by teachers to gain peer support and bring more parents to the school. This included the use of school website to interact with the parents especially the fathers. In the case of Hong Kong, the number of broken families is increasing and some fathers need to live and work in mainland China. Teachers are coping with more families with "single parents". In this regard, home visits were recommended as a good practice of teachers' work in many years ago. All this, a teacher reminded, should be kept closely within the vision and mission of the school. At the end of the meeting, a teacher emphasised that every effort should be made to help parents understand and accept the change of school policy because without parental support, school-based reform would be meaningless.

One parent reiterated that more meetings between parents and teachers could be introduced as soon as possible. The purpose was to facilitate two-way genuine communication and to engage in deep conversation that the parents involved would not need to worry about the consequences. This sort of parent-teacher meetings was recommended to have no fixed agenda in the early stages. It was evident that both teachers and parents were keen to create communicative spaces through a conversational approach so that those involved would feel easy to explore new frontiers of teachers' curriculum work by confronting educational issues and problems collaboratively. The unmasking of partnership in terms of home-school relations, and the need of communication and freedom were identified as two major emerging themes from the data.

On the one hand, it is noteworthy that the students were excited to engage in conversation about volunteer work and authentic and sincere contribution to school in the long run. On the other hand, students commented that their personal interest should be regarded to be equally important as the achievement of the school when some changes in school programs occurred. Some students worried that their self-esteem might be worsened due to close communication between parents and teachers that children's "secrets" in school would be unwillingly disclosed. Having said this, one student suggested to welcome parents to go to the classroom for observation because these parents had a genuine need to understand the children how to learn and behave in school at a new era of change. The teachers (as research

participants) had no objection provided that this innovative practice would be in trial by phase. Two emerging themes about whose responsibility and whose agenda were evident in the conversation among parents, teachers and students.

It now comes to a point that curriculum leadership within a context of school-based management may be seen as opening up an agenda of common interest in teachers, students and parents to change the world of school for better. At the time of education reform, creating the space for major stakeholders in shared decision-making with reference to human relations, and power and authority in school appears to be necessary – sharing a common vision of “start and smart”.

V. A shared agenda: Leading the partnership

This paper attempts to systematically document the analysis, interpretation and research outcomes and make them public out of the first phase of the pilot study. Of course, all this is not yet final. As I have said, the emerging ideas in the first phase of the pilot study will be compared with the second phase that the outcomes will flourish a climate of researching curriculum leadership across cultural contexts. The generative nature of this pilot work is acknowledged by the conclusions for now in the following:

1. Through reflection and action, teachers, parents and students are taken to a new platform upon which the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership is continually unfolding. This may happen by generating a shared agenda in the face of taking curriculum leadership into conversation and actions.
2. Crossing the borders from the territory of leadership to a new site of partnership is indeed a paradoxical challenge. However, this creates more research possibilities of extending the shared agenda to engage different talents and potentials of partners in curriculum making and thus liberating the freedom and sharing the responsibility of authentic curriculum change.
3. A shared agenda of curriculum leadership may be regarded as seeking the common interest of leading the partnership within the context of school-based management.

At this stage, theorising curriculum leadership appears to be an ongoing business which foreshadows *a shared agenda of leading the educational partnership*. There is still much to know about how cultural aspects impinging on the practice of shared decision-making and how managerial aspects opening up new structures within each school and across sites. Seriously, this pilot work has prompted us to rethink a traditional view of curriculum leadership which often relies on a person alone who is given great power and authority of curriculum decision-making in school.

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